



# THE FOURTH MASQUERADE

Ebi Yeibo

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# THE FOURTH MASQUERADE

**POEMS**

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## POEMS

**Ebi Yeibo**



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## Dedication

For my parents,  
George German Yeibo &  
Saijorce Yeibo,  
Who forged my being  
With the Almighty's seal  
And, with passionate strokes,  
Painted the rainbow  
Across my sky ...

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## Foreword

*The Fourth Masquerade*, Yeibo's fifth collection of poems, pushes his artistic impulse and utopian vision further, beyond rage, anger and his unpretentious desire for a moral order which should form the basis and nucleus around which every other thing revolves, in order to realize cosmic balance in the human world. This assertion is easily noticeable in his previous collections. *The Fourth Masquerade* is, however, characterized by an expository temper coupled with a cautionary tone one identifies with age and experience. The raging tone of protest is not completely absent from this collection, but it is encapsulated in ethnomoral metaphors geared towards re-ordering the human conscience. As one of the most important Nigerian poets who continue to write the nation in verse, Yeibo has strategically fashioned a kind of poetry that does not only derive its idiom from the prosody and folk tradition of the Izon of Nigeria, it equally advances the poet's vision through form and structure. His recourse to folklore and reliance on oral materials in the image-making process gives coherence and form to the poems. However, what distinguishes this collection from the previous ones is the question of the form through which he demonstrates an intense awareness of the Nigerian experience.

Although Yeibo's poetry has always focused on life in Nigeria and the context of evolving social, cultural, and political events and how geography, economics and politics continue to connive in the contraction of the identity of the Niger Delta people which in turn articulates the devastating condition under which they negotiate their existence in their vanishing habitation, it is the marriage of politics and poetics that makes Yeibo's poetry enduring. Just like no one lives

outside of a defined historical moment, Yeibo has never been afraid of or shirked what he fervently believes is his responsibility – the sense of responsibility shaped by his very aesthetic. Yeibo's poetry is inextricably grounded in the post-Shagari social and political transformation down to the millipedic and insoluble phase of the present Nigerian democracy. *The Fourth Masquerade* arguably explores the topography of everyday life in Nigeria. However, the most remarkable aspect of this collection is the eloquent mode with which it reaffirms Yeibo's capacity for articulating concerns other than the apparently political. By this vision, Yeibo has not only expanded the basis for the assessment of his work, but has also demonstrated his poetic ability to engage a variety of poetic conventions and forms. Like I have noted elsewhere, a panoptic appraisal of Yeibo's earlier work, will give expression to the fact that he hardly organizes his poems wholly around a specific thematic orientation. However, in *Shadows of the Setting Sun*, his fourth collection, the poet exhibits an easily discernible ability to organize the poems in the collection around a central idea and the organization of his metaphors and symbols is remarkable. In *The Fourth Masquerade*, Yeibo does not only demonstrate a remarkable competence at exploring several facets of human experience in a poetic idiom grounded in folk tradition – an idiom that does not lend itself to easy signification though, there is a synthesis between form and idiom in the delivery of message. Apparently, therefore, form in *The Fourth Masquerade* does not only give the poems structure, it becomes the textual mechanics or rhetorical design for the re-articulation and reiteration of Yeibo's poetic vision.

The title of the collection is reflective of Yeibo's recourse to a traditional art form indicative of the poetics of orality. Though an ethnocultural metaphor in the poetry of some

Nigerian poets, like the late Ezenwa-Ohaeto<sup>1</sup>, it does not only remind one of or evoke a festive ambience and the presence of the supernatural among mere mortals, the masquerade vibrantly establishes the intricate duality and continuity of existence in Africa and the unique union of man, the ancestors and the gods, reminiscent of the occasions of the baptism of Jesus the son of God and the transfiguration where the three spiritual personages that make up the Godhead manifested their distinctiveness before mortals. The masquerade in African metaphysics evokes the possibility of mere mortals transgressing the inelastic limit of their existence. The one who dons the mask carries a special spiritual burden, because at that moment he becomes a confluence of mortals, ancestors and the gods.

Yeibo has continued to express through poetry the relationship between the oppressed Nigerian/African and the rulers. His poetry addresses a deluge of themes and subjects: they include the bureaucratic inefficiency of government, corruption, poverty, infrastructural, moral and institutional decay, the deplorable conditions under which the Niger Delta people negotiate their existence, the vanishing or submerging Niger Deltascape and on some occasions, the lingering effects of colonialism on the African continent. This brings to bear the fact that the struggle for liberation has not in any way ended with the attainment of political independence in Africa. *The Fourth Masquerade* like most contemporary African poetry vibrantly demonstrates the continuous privilege poetry enjoys as the most immediate means of literary expression for the struggle for total liberation since the genre is in its own way an act of acknowledgement of a given reality.

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<sup>1</sup> Ezenwa-Ohaeto, *Voice of the Night Masquerade*



The title poem, “The Fourth Masquerade” which is also the first poem sets the tone of the collection. As a poet who continues to sustain a stable relationship with his Izon culture, he becomes attracted to the arts that constantly remind him of his origin and those of common rural folks, the social category he belongs to. Through this attachment to rural life, Yeibo displays his sense of responsibility as a poet by artistically exploiting traditional festivals that are organic to traditional African society<sup>2</sup>. Besides entertainment and the constant reminder about the origins of a people, one other cardinal function of traditional festivals is the ritual of regeneration and transformation of the adherents and their society. The ritual of regeneration and transformation is not whole in itself; rather, it essentialises the importance of reconciliation among humanity and supernatural forces. As I have noted elsewhere, Yeibo’s language is gradually becoming elitist. This is easily noticeable in the semantic density of his metaphorical choices. Like the quintessential Yeibo whose linguistic choices are deceptively simple and his subject usually definite and direct, the title poem appears to be evoking a festive mood and an ambience of celebration. This is not far from the point. However, the language and the style of delivery might seem simple and inviting, yet great depth is to be found underneath. These qualities of directness and deceptive simplicity become immediately apparent to anyone who picks this collection for the very first time. As you read on, you discover in no time that you are sailing into the deep waters of puzzlement.

The first poem is not only arresting, it reminds the reader about the fate of mankind and more importantly, the place

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<sup>2</sup> Dan Izevbaye. “Living the myth: Revisiting Okigbo’s art and commitment *Tydskrif Vir Letterkunde*, 48.1, 2011

of the poet metaphorised in the trope of the masquerade. One strategy Yeibo deploys to sustain the tone of the poem is the storytelling motif, which helps him advance meaning. Storytelling is without doubt the most readily accessible and most popular of African traditional oral imaginative forms. Rhetorically, stories are derived from the relationship between man and his environment which make them real. However the teller fantasizes with the real in order to bequeath the tale with universality usually geared towards a moral end. This strategy helps to sustain the idealistic vision of the teller thereby entrenching his own moral impulse, which is usually enduring:

These lines invoke  
The frothy salt waters  
Of mangrove swamp  
In the mild touch of the wind

Sending sensual motions-  
Tingling darts of blood-  
Through the navel of night  
And her dark eyelashes;

These lines are the owl  
Hooting ominous messages  
In choking pain  
In pubescent twilight

The poet locates the people associated with this festival by identifying their physical geography or their physical habitation which is swampy, indicative of the Niger Delta, specifically the Izon of Nigeria: "The frothy salt waters/ Of mangrove swamps". By beginning the collection with a traditional African festival, the poet underscores the centrality of the gods in achieving the poet's vision in this collection. A typical African festival subsumes the spiritual and the physical, represented by masquerades, gods and

humanity who must work together. Here the poet and his audience are engaged in a social dialogue geared towards enhancing or creating public accord which one notices in the structural arrangement of the poem. The poem is made of twenty one quatrains, which relate to the kind of symmetry, beauty and harmony that the world would attain if man and the gods work in one accord. Thus the fourth and fifth quatrains do not only carry the tone of caution, they are equally reminders of our nature as humans and what we need to do to attain cosmic balance for a peaceful coexistence in the mortal plane. The rapid association of images in the “burden of being,” “blood and dust”, “scowling mist” “loaded canoe” and the “raw palm fruit” that “causes cough” are prompters establishing the need for order and conscientious behaviour in human society. A lack of correspondence between man, his environment and supernatural forces produces a clash which in turn introduces elements of disorder and crises.

I think the most humorous and satiric poem in this collection is “For Hamza Al-Mustapha”. The poem does not only provoke laughter, it is direct and terse. Yeibo weaves a recent national issue into a popular Ijaw folklore about an elusive fish that is capable of making fun of the fisherman and his fishing paraphernalia no matter how dexterously he deploys his fishing kits. The poem is a paradigm for Nigeria’s permeable judicial system. The structural importance of this poem and Yeibo’s recourse to orality help advance meaning and embolden his satiric pellet. The poem is a reflection on the impact of corruption, bad governance, the compromised judicial system and their effect upon the moral health of the nation and the socio-economic conditions of the masses. Although the poem centres on the Nigerian judiciary, it profoundly engages the Nigerian ruling class, making it the target of the satiric pill and vitriol.

Though derived from Izon folk tradition, Yeibo invests this poem with such exquisite imagery and emotional intensity that it becomes a thrillingly unique poem. While being satiric, it equally provokes anger especially because of the certainty of freedom the judiciary offers the political class even in the full glare of the masses:

The courts are a torn net  
Hauled on the river; roving  
Fish have a field day  
Swimming through in shiny scorn;

Even the ones caught  
Send a telepathic message  
To their empathizing kindred  
From the home-bound canoe  
Through unyielding hyacinth

Not to mourn yet  
Until they enter the pot.

Yeibo's poetic reflections on the Niger Delta are not only engaging; they are artistically poignant. Though, he uses politics to invigorate his poetry and sustains the mood with the raging temper of the time, the poems hardly deviate from the sagacity and athleticism of the craft associated with a devoted and seasoned craftsman. A careful appraisal of poems like, "The Wrong Inheritance", "No Festivals Here", "Open Paradox", and "The Delta of Yore" in this collection demonstrates Yeibo's abiding devotion and dedication to the Niger Delta cause and the urgent need to redeem his people and their vanishing homeland from the galloping greed of government and the capitalistic insensitivity of the multinational oil firms. His poems on the Niger Delta do not stand naked as social and environmental rage, Yeibo performs his ethical and social responsibility by linking his natural environment to the bleak and stifling social

circumstances of the Niger Delta in particular and the Nigerian nation at large. Interestingly, therefore, Yeibo poignantly harnesses the deltascap to create an atmosphere of gloom and pessimism. His images on the Niger Delta are forceful so that they configure the actual damage brought upon the environment in a cinematographic manner that assaults the human conscience. For example, in “No Festival Here” Yeibo schematically reflects upon the deplorable condition of the environment as a result of oil exploration and exploitation:

Festivals have since recoiled  
From streets along the waterway;  
Dipped into rabid dungs of memory  
Or buried in the overspilling clouds  
Taken over the horizon  
Scribbling the lean loves  
Lining the age, like a kwashiorkor patient.

The festive moments are gone because:

Here a full tide of oil  
Breeds milky monsters at the top  
Who taunt the treasury  
Spitting sore slums and scraps  
Though where the water pot stands  
There is no dry season;

In “The Wrong Inheritance” Yeibo questions the consistency of the promoters of the amnesty package as a move to massively change the plight of the Niger Delta people and their environment for good though he does not mention the policy:

So something disqualifies  
These seekers of peace  
On the swirling waves of the creeks

Middlemen who dance on the graves  
Of saints sacrificed in the struggle  
Who take the lion's share  
Of the proceeds of truce  
Behind prying eyes

Thus Yeibo's constant resonation of the predicament of the Niger Delta people in his poetry where with a fearless love of truth and keen psychological insight of the despairing ecological drama continuously enacted in the region is not only to specifically signify his patriotism to environmental justice and the Delta cause, he equally draws attention to an institutional failure.

Significantly, the formal structure (one stanza) of the last poem "Mystery" aptly resonates the poet's artistic vision for humanity in this collection: the synergy between man, the ancestors and the gods, as the only pragmatic strategy for human progress. The intervening poems (that is, between the first and last poems) centre on human weaknesses and the continuous fall from the eternal edenic state of being reflected in the formlessness of the poems, an indication of the oppressive social condition where mankind negotiates existence. In contrast, "Mystery" symbolizes a lingering sense of hope for redemption. The poem advocates a union between humans, the ancestors and the gods as a way out of the plight of human existence. Thus, we must understand nature in Yeibo's poems in a double sense because on one level, it exists for its own sake and, on another level, it evokes the poet's social ethos. At a glance, the last poem will confuse the poet's mood as that of nostalgia over the loss of the eternal habitation of the Delta people. However, the poem only draws attention to the answers to humanity's most elusive questions; why are we here? And, how do we survive? The order the poet advocates in the first poem becomes realizable in the last, only if humanity realizes that it is not "a strident taboo":

To look left, where  
The shrine was stationed,  
So mortals did not  
Behold a god's face?

The vision of a possible harmonious society where everything will be organically whole is only achievable by institutional checks and balances anchored on time tested moral-ethical foundation and the commonality of dream between man and the supernatural world:

O one thought  
Man and god needed to tango  
In one eternal clasp  
Like mortar and pestle  
To fashion a decent voyage  
Against the roaring tide.

*The Fourth Masquerade* will always remain remarkable in the corpus of Yeibo's imaginative composition for two important reasons. First, it does not merely comment on or versify social events of everyday life in Nigeria; the poems also make social, political and historical analysis of these events and by extension foreground the urgency of a second independence, negotiable through a synergy between the gods, ancestors and humanity. Second, one easily notices the wide range and constancy of Yeibo's vision in this collection in the way he epigrammatically captures human flaws through his penetrating power of thought, the artful deployment of metaphors and the use of folk tradition in order to defend exalted human values. But more importantly, most of the poems signal the answers to the eternal questions confronting humanity.

**Ogaga Okuyade, PhD**

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A fleet of eagles,  
Over the oilbean shadows,  
Holds the square  
Under curse of their breath.

**Christopher Okigbo**

Our concessions come  
from weakness ....  
What have victims not provided  
their victors for their own ruin?  
The earth is my witness.

**Tanure Ojaide**



## The fourth masquerade

These lines invoke  
The frothy salt waters  
Of mangrove swamps  
In the mild touch of the wind

Sending sensual motions—  
Tingling darts of blood—  
Through the navel of night  
And her dark eyelashes;

These lines are the owl  
Hooting ominous messages  
In choking pain  
In pubescent twilight

Reminding man  
Of the burden of being—  
To wake to his blood and dust  
In the scowling mist

Reminding man  
The loaded canoe  
Sails near the shoreline  
Raw palm fruit causes cough.

Yesternight, the fourth masquerade  
Danced the last steps  
In the village square  
In the dazzling klieg lights

And retired to Owu Bou—\*  
Every step a colourful memory  
Every step a torrent of bliss  
Beyond bugs and roaches.

Today, like every other day  
This Olorogun\* festive season  
The fourth masquerade  
Promptly stirs again

To chase and strike  
Running, gasping, yelling mortals  
Twitching on the edge  
In their weakest moments, or glitches,

Not in the seething spleen  
Of an avowed enemy;  
In fraternal fanfare and fondness  
To pluck overweening airs, from mortals

To rescue the hidden pearl  
In the whirlwind of self, more so  
After a frothy wine of power,  
To delirious fans' applause

To hoist the halo of the land  
Spawned by the silent mystery  
Of fluvial spirits roaming  
The imponderable swirling winds

The age-long rituals streaking with sap  
In the foggy forests  
The restorative sacrifices  
At the riverside ...

O this Olorogun festival  
Woven around the one with a stark dark face  
Peripatetic, vicious, intractable  
With a blazing cutlass in the sun

Sprouted from the loins  
Of a sinewy feisty fish  
Beyond the tiny size

Beyond the mystical glow

Aye's net caught

In far away Aghoro River

Hence the cognomen:

*Ala beni kolo kolo ...\**

And in steaming unison

The frantic fans tease it in mock song

Heightening the sportive ire

Floating scarily in the wind

And in steaming unison

The frantic fans tease it in mock ululation

Garnishing the tense splendour

Of the sun; stirring the blood of the fiesta:

*Again, the masquerade will retire*

*Without striking a soul*

*Sankia, Owa ...*

*Wúwú wúwú wúwú ...*

A little play ploughed into sweat

Bursts at the seams, harassing the hyacinths

Congregating on the shores

Of buzzing markets.

The wise utters little

Sinking into the smokescreen

The unreachible depths

Of their homely skins ...

---

\* Meeting-place of masquerades in the forest.

\* The annual Olorogun masquerade festival of Ayakoromo, Delta State, Nigeria.

\* The literal translation is "salt water is bitter", referring to the saline water of Aghoro River, and the viciousness of the masquerade.

## Questions hang in the wind

Those who seek answers  
To the whirling questions in the wind  
Carry the earth's inveterate burden—  
No sanctuary sprouts in a conundrum.

The burden of breath as wanderer  
    In search of an anchor  
    In the sealed scroll from on high  
The burden of netted tilapias  
    Exploiting entangled pathways  
The burden of a woman's breasts  
    Plunging us into crippling debts  
The burden of phantom hugs  
    Hiding the dagger of the mind  
    In freezing fondness and fanfare ...

The wind carries numb gestures  
Of sadists and saints at crossroads  
Of the racy dog  
    Going past excreta  
Of the exposed yam tuber  
    No longer sinking in the soil  
Of the carefree maggot  
    Taking over the raffia palm  
Of castrated compatriots  
    Eyeing the juicy lap of nirvana  
    On fallen bridges  
Of the heedless masquerade  
    Missing its steps  
    In public glare  
Of the tiny ants  
    Of little moments

Growing into timeless pantheons—

A workshop for passionate star gazers  
Whose duty, as they say,  
Turns out a mere illusion  
Or a smug exercise  
Of some muggy passion.

O each step of sweat  
On the inky staircase of solutions  
To the knots of the mind  
To the questions in the wind  
Leads to more wandering and stillness  
And sighs and yawns and moans  
Howling in the horizon;

Living is an irredeemable abyss  
A nameless nothing  
Needing seasonless surfing and servicing  
Like a playful cat, scratching  
The earth's surface, for nothing.

And each step of penitence  
Or rectitude or doxology  
Springing from shallow depths  
Only yields more questions  
More complications, more sweat,  
Like an entangled gold fish  
Struggling in vain for freedom.

O come with me  
To where a change of blood  
Solves all riddles  
Dogging the path  
To the soul's satiation;  
All mortal troubles  
Spring from the blood.



## The burden of blood

How can we enjoy laughter  
On the wrong side of the mouth  
Or hanging tremulous  
On stung and twisted tongues  
Between two canine teeth?

How can we enjoy laughter  
When the burden of blood  
Weighs us down a throbbing grave;  
The fountainhead of true rapture  
Still foiled by synthetic whirlwinds  
Or rests, complacent,  
On the margins of balking souls?

How can we enjoy laughter  
When nuts tucked away  
In sightless carapaces  
Of clowns, remain uncracked;

When the brood of ancient hyacinths  
A proteinous treasure trove  
Buzzing with song, remains untapped?

This bald truth is the undying  
Midwife of stillbirth suns  
Living smudge of running waters;  
The cannons, too, are dumb  
Convulsing with the guilt of the land;  
O how loud the gods speak  
With the stinging voice of silence!

And our clan continues to cringe  
Before importunate beings, who  
Hold the yam and the knife

Who cause us to gasp and trip  
A million times over, though  
Not pursued, or even stalked  
By the ubiquitous fourth masquerade.

Importunate beings who take the land  
Not through fortuitous sleight  
But by naked force; twisting  
The fruity tale of stars  
Congealing the blood of state.

O these importunate beings  
Fly in the cosy air  
In the warm bosom of the sun  
Only to swoop on the public pouch  
Down below, in breathless succession,  
Like hawks having a free reign  
On wayward chicks

Throwing around  
abstruse scraps and shrapnel  
Blinding dust and rust—  
Catalysts of straying clans  
Keeping the bard awake,  
Beyond the dolphin  
That sleeps with one eye open,  
Constantly sleuthing,  
Mustering men of munificence  
Above the roaring tide.

No wonder even the dumb  
Holler their praise names  
In the kingdom of crooks;  
  
This is the burden of blood  
Unrepentant worshipper  
In the frontierless shrine of flesh

Swollen suitor to dry winds  
And that ominous flood pumping  
Wanton waters into the stomach.

How can we crack  
The riddle of the wretched  
Spangled on a phony spectrum  
Pandering to the lifeless toasts  
Of a trillion lepers  
Glued to sacred thrones?

The delectable flower  
Welcoming invidious guests  
At the balcony of her sunshine  
Drops dead, without hope of a resurrection.

Only a madman  
Thinks the wanton mangling  
Of one's umbilical cord  
In the market square  
A hilarious spectacle,  
Or, perhaps, the feathery caress  
Of the passing wind.

Only a mad man shows off  
The iron tethers on his testicles  
As love gifts or, perhaps  
A salute to the guts;  
Hugging the strange men  
Digging his grave— as if in a dream.

This is the unhealing wound  
Of a rusty nail  
Defying the balmy moats  
Of tetanus injection  
And deep-throated prayers;

This is the straight road  
The anointed pathway  
With branches and bends and barbs  
Leading to life, in a stunted jungle.

O give this burden  
A rightful name  
Uproot its noxious suckers  
With matching matchets and mattocks;

The okra tree, however tall,  
Must bow to the whims  
Of its indubitable owner  
Along the corridors of the wind.

## They need new names

*(for El Rufai, nPDP & APC\*)*

They feign defection  
From the homestead  
Of sanguine dictators  
Scribbling, or passing, glibly tongues  
Through every strand of sunlight  
To consummate their new names  
On the substrates of the earth.

But just yesterday, and even today,  
Our friends climbed spooky rafters  
Of heathens, with pentecostal gusto  
Their pockets bulging with arsenal  
And the grand masters' direct lines

Thinking along  
One straight line  
Like Saul on the road to Damascus  
Or the fourth masquerade  
On the track of raucous fans  
Or the pointed thing  
Bared for fecund depths  
In the enchanted grove  
Streaking with sumptuous fluid ...

Now they feign defection  
From the plundering party  
To trap the halo of the moment  
Clasping us to their breasts  
Soaked in never-ending debts to their gods  
Cringing us before our own shadows  
Which scold us, like the continual baying  
Of a rabid dog, at a haggard stranger.  
This brand new birth

On the showglass of the times  
In wilful harmony  
With the green crowd  
Tickles the gloating soul.

O we must make a statement  
With burnt candles and dry inks  
And shrunk physiognomies, in twilight  
To hoist this apostasy, wanton,  
On the flagpole of poetry.

We must make a statement  
With the undying fibre of our voice  
Echoing through the arteries  
Of the dark void;  
We must hold up sparkling words  
As lampterns, to find a straight path  
In this cocktail of murk.

We must trumpet this halo  
Through the walls of the light years  
Through distant oceans and fields.

We must screen the new names  
Which wrap up ancient maelstroms  
In fresh cocoyam leaves  
For a priceless gift to the earth  
Dour, like swirling smoke in moonlight.

We must paddle this heaving catch  
Past swollen waves of the sea  
Past hounds and bulldogs  
Prying eyes of devious saints  
And their double-decked munificence  
In soft homely songs of the soul.

---

\* Nasir Ahmad El-Rufai, a one-time Nigerian minister and author of *The Accidental Public Servant*.

\* 'New' People's Democratic Party.

\* All Progressives Congress .

## They need new names II

*(for EL Rufai, nPDP & APC)*

The furrows or tongues  
Of these new saviours  
Tell nothing of dark-tanned dreams  
In the damned mould  
Of Saul's depravity—

Resplendent in outer make  
Replete with inner crisis;  
Reeking of the tomb's sore content.

O the cross of this age  
Is the riddle of appearance  
Carries us through long tedious tunnels  
Burns out blood and bone.  
The white sweat of the gods  
Needs no handkerchief to dry up  
Cancels out the strains of sunlight.

The bottom of this new name  
Is in the enchanting melodies  
Of the sunbird gleefully pecking  
At red palm fruit  
As if glued to the feast  
In the forest of Amatebe

Where school boys  
Played assorted pranks  
Dodging to the town square  
With no permit or exeat card  
Now a broad highway  
Hosting mansions and milestones  
The wind, surely, is not static.

So why do the new saviours  
Point to the rainbow  
In the not-too-distant sky  
Forgetting yesterday, when they  
Pocketed the communal pouch  
Blinking none of the six senses  
Without sweat or contrition  
Surpassing the penchant of their forebears  
In the acrobatic mould  
Of a monkey diving at banana?

O the limits of terrestrial lords  
Is the starting point of benevolent gods,  
Inviolable, cancelling out earthly plots  
Even of those who need new names  
To print same poignant designs.



## Rage in the desert

*(for Boko Haram\*)*

Terrorists taunt mortal blood  
In the desert, like some plaything,  
Perhaps a child's toy  
Or the fourth masquerade  
In the distant delta  
Chasing and thrashing  
Frantic fans, in blithesome strides.

The sweet breath of brotherhood  
Stops in their flaming strikes  
Flowing markets stall  
In the smoky horizon  
Dripping dreams hang  
In the sulky sky  
The soil too hot  
For tender tendrils  
In this feisty rage.

O the detached logic  
Of power schemers  
Who see human breath  
As a mere off-and-on switch  
Like the covert code  
Of coven kings  
Takes over the cringing earth  
Replacing tingling crops  
With tripping tombstones.

The enstranged lore  
Of martyrdom dreamers  
A handle for neutron bombs  
In undecipherable gestures  
Of the deaf and dumb

Smothers the world  
To clear footpaths to paradise  
In a seething one-sided fray  
Stinging the sun in the scrotum.

Now the rusty rhetoric  
From Aso rock\*  
Too estranged to capture  
The right mood  
Loaded with abnegation  
In a million toothless miracles  
Flung on the insufferable masses  
Too dazed even for manna  
From the high heavens.

In this cadaverous night  
When the moon mates  
Hooded angels of darkness  
From the far desert  
Mountain freaks climbing for fresh air  
Stumble on pointed stumps  
Bandied about in sweet tongues  
As fruit-packed shrubs and privets.

The few succulent fruits  
From the rock  
Are sucked dry, on their trees,  
By sleepless saints  
Boasting a handle for the desecrated  
Only to consecrate the night  
With vapid husks  
Scorching sneezes and homing snarls.

---

\* A militant Islamic sect in Northern Nigeria

\* The seat of government in Nigeria

## **We hawk horrid memories**

*(for Boko Haram)*

We hawk horrid memories  
Of a sprawling landscape  
To a listless world  
Grappling with sundry stings  
Staring at timorous time  
Square on the weather-beaten tray  
Of strange fancies spawned  
By some dusky sage in the desert

Extending the shadow  
Already too long and stifling  
In the horizon, cast on mortals  
By the masked moon.

Who on earth revels  
In hawking loose beings  
Whose rancid breath chokes the earth  
Whose wild instincts  
Defy all rational schools  
Even in-house, without sap or dew  
Swifter and more devious  
Than a slithering cobra  
On compromising branches?

Who dares sing bombastic songs  
Before fresh corpses, saplings  
Fallen to the cringing blast  
Of Boko Haram bombs  
Throwing around motley  
Contortions and cracks  
Misery and moans?

Let us salve the senses' errors  
Make love anew, in the spirit  
Of the creed of the moon  
So we can pluck red nuts  
From tall palm trees  
In the summit of the sun.

Let us probe the masked moon  
That deceived the straying cockerel  
Into the depths of night;  
Disarm her grinning antics  
Or fall into the trap—  
Except we smash the head  
The wriggle of the wounded cobra  
Is a steady sauce for suspicion.

O no need for mourners to rehearse  
The moans of misery;  
Do not listen to the prodding lines  
Of wormy statesmen  
Or hot-headed sages  
The movement of the blood in brusque strides  
Towards volcanic heights and broken pots.

## Facing the flames

*(for Boko Haram & their sponsors)*

A palisade against  
The roving light of the west  
Held hostage by the incantations  
Of mat-carrying initiates;

O drag them down  
The mountain of shame  
From where they pee  
On messengers of the most high  
In mythic flight–

The errors of the heart  
Push benighted felons  
To crooked endeavours.

The funerary drums begin to sound  
In the depths of the desert.

*Seize the wind  
With bombs and bullets*

Bellowed the surly voice  
In the background  
Rejected in the general count  
Like a spurned suitor  
Igniting furnaces of mass murder–  
Whetstone of another war  
On the back of a sullen loss.

We shall answer for  
Every pint of blood  
Shed on the trail  
Of our fiery mouths–  
Hollow in chastity  
Without a compass, or circumspection

Pulling down caked clouds  
On the homely drift.

O let this steely grip  
By incensed green men, stay on  
No pleas douse the resolve  
To open their rancid entrails  
In the centre of the market place;

When the swollen head crumbles  
Stone faces behind  
Grovel on the ground  
Or take to their heels

And their vicious scheme  
Of a sahelian drought  
Across the land, hang  
Without teeth, in the wind.

Let the priest of Odele\*  
Sanctify the surly horizon  
Save this burning place  
Of yet another black plot

To mate the menacing clouds  
In the ripest season  
Leaving behind  
Howling offspring of carnage.

## Legends of today

*(for the 26 Bayelsa unemployed graduates)*

The horizon erects statuettes  
Of strange legends and lords  
Who cruise the world round  
In chartered jets and helicopters  
In the swollen wings  
Of floating white eagles;  
The world below groans  
In the frying flames of flow stations  
And the long-drawn drought  
Spawned by man's missed steps  
Swallowing the soothing powers of the sun.

The horizon erects statuettes  
Of strange legends and lords  
Who block the free flow  
Of oily props and peace of the soul  
With their haughty breath  
    Profane gestures  
    Sunless signatures  
Scanning every crowing voice  
In broad daylight, for specks of dissent  
Asking the weird question:

*Who beats the drum in the forest?*

These legends and lords  
Survey our scrotums  
Hounding and heckling us  
With blustering uniformed men  
On the streets  
On cyberspace  
On our phones

On our beds  
For imagined, sharpened  
Or obtuse threats  
To the free reign  
Of owls and bats and crows  
Who cruise in weird winds  
With heavy black blood  
In their pouch and breasts  
Choking every being to stupor  
Forgetting the lion does not eat  
A bestrodden animal.

*If you must know, my lords,  
Hunger beats the drum  
In the rumbling stomach  
Pumping up grit and guts  
To cross those peevish paths  
Pampered by the people's purse:*

*Don't we remember  
When an orphan has a full stomach  
He forgets his roots?*

O the gauche paradox  
Of blockheads and night men  
Receiving scarce succour  
From the coffers of the state  
Gives teeth to the dictum  
The Mami Wata takes life  
On shallow shores.

And how sweet and discreet  
Boro's\* remains were exhumed  
From the state of aquatic splendour  
For a square earth to earth in his roots  
So the ancestors woke up  
To the strident sound of warriors' songs



Cannon shots and clash of cutlasses  
In a colourful procession of canoes  
Decked out in fresh palm fronds  
And black-and-red costumes  
At the riverside, tickling the waters  
Silently flowing by; painting  
The dews of dawn, in golden hues.

So the ancestors woke up  
To savour the early morning breeze  
Scented with the company  
Of a sparkling kinsman,  
Long in the rain ...

O let us look the way  
Of lads carrying hurricane lamps  
To find a path  
In the long, grisly night,  
Like striplings foraging for snail  
In dark and damp corners;  
Trudging with calloused feet  
And dehydrated physiognomies  
In clouded valleys  
In the cold wind.

Let us look the way  
Of Boro's extended offspring  
In their suffocating corner of the earth  
So they invest the capital  
Gleaned through sappy sweat  
On marshy, knotty roads  
In saltless horizons.

What corpse, buried,  
Leaves its legs outside?

---

\* Isaac Boro, iconic Niger Delta revolutionary.

# The triumph of charlatans

*(for the new wave of Christianity)*

Charlatans milling around the temple  
Like akparakpa\* fresh palm wine  
Water down the salt of the earth  
Besmear ancient sacred vestments  
On the road to the moon  
Open on infinite green fields.

Whose eyes are steady enough  
To count the multitude of sterile stars  
Roaming the pistillate sky?  
O stretch not the goal post  
    For lame prodigies to score  
Stretch not your naked eyes  
    Past the line on the pitch.

Purge your heart of heresy  
    The sky has space  
    For all flying things;  
Purge your hand of horrid holes  
    Looking for miracles in infernal corners;  
Purge your eyes of lewd glances  
    You may need to cut off that part  
    To service the scriptures;  
Purge your mouth of mendacities  
    Tainted instincts do not fit into light.

The muse of modern man  
On hallowed heights, is strange indeed,  
Like the madman of Amatebe  
Seizes the stomach-offering  
Of neighbours, in open stealth  
In the name of the Father

Proclaims nothing comes  
Near their mouths  
With bulging stomachs  
And a rugged climb  
To the summit of dreams

Planting demons in the whirlwind  
To reap the expansive world—  
Onions grow on cow dung;  
A token of the blood of stone  
Running through black veins  
Sinking whole communes  
With infinitely long throats.

Legends sprout from sweat  
And the promise of bruises  
In every conceivable field  
Though the gods lubricate mortal paths  
With morning dew that dries not  
Until destiny's deal is done  
In the infinite expanse of the sea  
In wild wanton wavelashes.

---

\* A kind of insect.

# The wrong inheritance

*(for the middlemen of the Creeks)*

We step our solemn feet  
On the bridge across raped seas  
Bulbuls shriek in sultry daylight  
In the surrounding forests  
Knowing colourful masks  
Hide this wild and weird world.

Spangled souls without a stake  
In the affairs of loft  
Whose voices sink in the vast sea  
Like a tiny pebble  
Are crowns of the coast  
Inherit the choice estates  
Infinite in their glow  
Hosting man's baffling neons.

O who can cover the countless inanities  
Glued to their mouths?  
Who can carry this obese world  
On their heads  
And think they can lead  
The choir in heaven;  
The unheard music of delirium  
Softly playing on the strings of their brains?

Nothing empty dissolves  
Or swells or fossilizes  
Even in the soulful touch  
Of a damsel, even  
In the most responsive regions  
Of mortal physiognomy  
Even in the navel

Of the mellow moon;  
Something in the mould of being  
Must grow or stand still or give way.  
Something hooked by the heart  
Fostered by travelling blood  
That rocks the pointed point  
Weaving waves in and out  
Of buttered flesh  
In the complicit closet,  
Spreading warmest balm  
On bleeding veins and joints  
Like calm forests, after a bitter storm.

So something disqualifies  
These seekers of peace  
On the swirling waves of the creeks  
Middlemen who dance on the graves  
Of saints sacrificed in the struggle  
Who take the lion's share  
Of the proceeds of truce  
Behind prying eyes

Nimble patriots who spit on  
The lingering pains and spleen  
Over unfulfilled prophecies  
As fiendish and foolhardy  
As squabbling landlords over territory  
At my Agudama\* backyard  
Nibbling away, in secret triumph  
Like the wraith-like Odidigboigbo\*.

---

\* An area in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

\* One-time Governor of Delta State, Nigeria, Onanefe Ibori's praise name.

## For Hamza Al-Mustapha\*

The courts are a torn net  
Hauled on the river; roving  
Fish have a field day  
Swimming through in shiny scorn;

Even the ones caught  
Send a telepathic message  
To their empathizing kindred  
From the home-bound canoe  
Through unyielding hyacinth

Not to mourn yet  
Until they enter the pot.

---

\* Chief Security Officer to Nigeria's one-time Head of State, General Sani Abacha.

## No festivals here

Festivals have since recoiled  
From streets along the waterway;  
Dipped into rabid dungs of memory  
Or buried in the overspilling clouds  
Taken over the horizon  
Scribbling the lean loves  
Lining the age, like a kwashiorkor patient.

O what lascivious lies  
Casting unbleachable coal tar  
On overpowered stars—  
Outcasts in deep congregation  
Posing with seductive curves  
In darkling corners of the earth

Swiftly abducting the godhead  
With the fruity syllables  
Of their hips or lips,  
Hoisting flowery psalms  
And spangled dreams  
Like flying turtles in children's cartoons

Deepening strains of blood  
Interlocked in the seething sky  
Where midgets of men  
Maul head-mountains  
Or take them as footstool  
Or, better still,  
Image injectors, or projectors  
With sprawling purses;

And the moon seems to place  
A sentient seal  
On this prickly paradise

Even without a hoot  
The spirit of the age  
Howling in the horizon  
Ticking like a million minutes.

Here a full tide of oil  
Breeds milky monsters at the top  
Who taunt the treasury  
Spitting sore slums and scraps  
Though where the water pot stands  
There is no dry season;

Burrowing in shrouded strides  
Like the earthworm, king  
Of the inveterate earth  
Not a single bump  
Though rooted against  
A thousand breaths

Never faltering nor flattering  
Like a smiling moon  
On a forest-paved footpath at night  
Egging the shadow on  
To where hunger kills the soul  
With a heaving petalled harvest  
Hanging in the horizon.



## This land stands on its head

We ring heavy church bells  
As a consummate Catholic Catechist  
Summons all to the Angelus  
When the land stands  
Giddily on its head

When steely snares  
Woven into white depths  
Hold mortals captive  
In pithy dreams dead on the mind  
Like a rabbit smothered in its hole.

Memory brings back dark entrails  
Piled up in open interspaces  
Of street corners and offices  
In sly moods of bedrooms  
And countless conferences.

O these stars in white smock  
Who pamper the crucifix in public  
Cloaking lewd laughs  
In inner corners of the mind.

Swallowing up any spark  
In endless stretches  
Of potholes and puddles, dismembering  
Wrinkled seventh-grade cars  
In freezing tales of lost limbs  
With no balm for the gash  
And the air taut  
Like a steel rat trap.

The snags of memory pile up  
In the air, land, water

In loft jocund leaps,  
Like laughing silver waves  
Sliding high on the ocean  
Before a licentious crash  
Into the cataclysmic embrace  
Of long-yawning mermaids.

## Open paradox

This is the season  
Of fleshy harvests  
Portal of doughty dreams  
And resonant laughters  
Cascading down distant hilltops.

Yet the world below  
Wilts in the heat  
Of forlorn fancies  
Sliding into morbid sorrow;  
Countless mouths and stomachs  
Lie fallow for ages,  
Like ink-deprived pens  
That cannot write.

This is the season  
Of cerulean skies and placid seas  
Even in the presence of incensed gods  
And lost sojourners find their way  
To the main market  
In swiftly sailing canoes  
Like snakes slithering away on water.

Yet the economy of aborigines  
Shrinks in dire thraldom  
In long laborious labyrinths  
Baring the smudge  
Of soot on the white smock  
Of coast dwellers, paddling

On the margins  
Of their own oily swamps,  
Like the strange dilemma  
Of a gleeful bride

On the back seat  
In her own nuptials.

Or the damsel in delectable apparel  
Who strummed soulful songs on the podium  
To a roarioulsy doting crowd  
Only to fall to a sword  
In an ante-room, without a row.

## The howling wind

No one can tell  
The colour of the wind  
Even in its Christmas paraphernalia  
Like the heart  
Of some darkling god  
Open to the prognosis  
Of some pukka prophet.

The colour of the supreme  
Resonates in the howling  
Fanfare of the wind  
The milky sea breeze  
The ruthless lightning and hurricane  
The pungent squawk of thunder ...

O the wind can tear  
Mountains apart  
Shatter the rocks ...

The undecipherable gestures  
Of the I AM THAT I AM  
Of the earth and sky  
Activate tardy elements  
Like a genial blonde  
Manly parts which puke  
Where they eat;  
Like the prophecy of the bard  
Sets dying suns on fire.

In her sensual caress  
The wind gathers  
Hidden secrets of the sea  
In a swirling maelstrom  
In the mermaid's den

Sends same in instalmental folds  
To the jocund bosom of the Boss.

O the rustling river  
Of flowing legends  
Their sumptuous fluids  
Powered by the wind  
Leading to the eternal godhead  
The funerary traps and iron dams  
No power dares break or barricade.

Leaves sway their wet waists  
In the rapturous rainy season  
In love tango with the wind  
Bearing vermillion fruits  
Carrying the incandescent burden  
Of a squinting squire  
Condemned to meandering paths or ways  
Or muffling altars or temples.

Does man know  
The same wind sails  
Flailing mortals in the dry season  
Distributing acrid desert dust  
To every naked nostril  
When all nature shrivels

Like a dehydrated cholera patient  
Failing to float leisurely  
In the blue sky  
Like the squeaky kite,  
Like a burst balloon?

## Fate of man

Globules of triumphant blood  
Gurgle in a swelling heart  
Wading through boiling waters  
And neutron bombs  
Shaming the brittle barricade  
Of hurricanes and howitzers.

When mortal blood tastes triumph  
It walks like a royal priest  
Demons and capones and their ilk  
Do obeisance to a divine staff of office  
The world watches the spectacle  
In wanton wonder:  
The racing canoe never sails backward.

The blood of a triumphant heart  
Climbs veins and arteries posthaste  
Tickling mortal brains and bums;  
The dead live beyond triumph

Beyond fantasies and fables  
Beyond bush fires and burning gods  
Beyond rodents and man  
Bumping into one another  
Scampering for safety  
From smothering sanctuaries

Beyond iron traps and flinching fields  
Fleeing monkeys squalling in treeless forests  
Beyond the mutant chameleon  
Which can not wait to ingraft  
The colour of the flames  
Beyond the billowing wiles

Of conquistadors and capones  
Blowing man to squalid slums  
The frothy waves of sludgy seas  
Roaring in their guttural voices  
In the distant horizon  
Slapping eagerly waiting shores  
With their towering heights;  
  
The blistering sunlight overwhelms  
The howling wind, the sultry birds  
In forlorn feverish flight.



## In this vast world

The dripping grace of their gods  
Swells their pouches and powers  
Tramps translate into inviolable titans  
Beckoning lustily to covetous souls  
To wear a haughty crown of thorns  
Or serve in servile stations forever more.

The tongues of ancient gods  
Spit fire and brimstone and hailstone  
From the tawdry world of the dark  
Oblivious of the overwhelming ardour  
Of the white light, the cornerstone  
That props up the horizon.

In this vast world  
Parrots can be silenced  
Winging lions hobbled  
Tall dreams dwarfed or stunted  
By the pithy power of magic coins  
In morbid league  
With a *babalawo's* chants  
Or the manoeuvring of heartless covens.

In this vast world  
Hordes of Giants  
Take the broad way in stealth  
Licking wild salt alone  
Without flight in light  
Leaning on  
Dysfunctional wings  
Of fallen gods.

May thunder release  
The muffled manhood of the masses

In a meteoric flight to the moon  
In the simultaneous echo  
Of seven primed cannons—

The hen's sickness  
Never tarries till evening;  
The foliage of freedom is ever fresh  
In the silhouetted forest  
Of shrivelling thorns and cactus.

## The child can pluck the moon

With a sanguine stretch of the mind  
A child can pluck the moon  
From the sky's socket  
And unseen lions and leopards  
Escort the toddler conqueror home  
Before baying hounds  
And sulky soldier ants.

The earth is intrepid without dreams  
Sinking down in smutty depths  
Or long overarching clouds  
To rise winsome on the podium  
In soft stirring songs  
For soothing flowers and pecks.

O the coast is not always fair  
The early birds may not  
Sleep on the beach  
The bone that tans the teeth  
Gives problems to the tongue.

Do we need reminding  
Where there is no eseni\*  
Agboğidi steals the show of the pot?  
When a hen loses a fight  
The owner shrinks in shame?

When the soothing song  
Of the soul is slaughtered  
By morbid man or beast  
Or even the elements  
The world goes dumb,  
Like a bruised drum

The salt of the sea is drowned  
In the cadaverous calvary of waves.

In the frigid breeze  
Standing still in the horizon  
Summoned at the break of dawn  
Palm fronds from the sages  
Shunned by the priest  
Of the wilting grove  
The bleeding dove flapping its wings  
Against the sombre oracle ...

We wake up in the delta  
To sweltering flow stations  
And oil wells colouring  
Free flowing waters  
The earthy blaze  
And greasy chemicals  
Covering the moon's face  
Harassing the deep green herbage  
Wilting tender tendrils

Strange as the laughter of lepers  
In a depraved colony  
Angling for ineffectual apothecaries  
Straining for the soul's flight  
Even to synthetic hills.

## Naked in the sun

Under the unction  
Of some heinous god  
Layabouts sit before a set table  
Winking at the hilltop  
Where the living petals of dream  
Are dug in muddied rungs.

Out of the fetid air  
Of some tyrant's kingdom  
Sprouts a garden of greenery  
Where farmers plant with songs  
Tendrils shoot out in endless acres  
Without the fecund touch of rain  
Clouds bring loud laughter  
Though the horizon is overcast

For those who sow mortal blood  
On slaughter slabs, like red tomatoes  
On cursed soils, behind the whistling wind

Out of irksome crossroads  
Behind the baring sun  
Open only to culprits  
Come preachers of platitude  
Yes, they proclaim continence  
Like Binebai's\* seventh virgin  
Though exuberant in their pants:

The smell of dried shrimp  
Or pounded rotten crabs  
Gravitates crawling thing  
Even in the dead of night  
The smell of camphor  
Wards off crawling things

The smell of mythylated spirits  
Helps veinous cramps ...

Out of a half-hearted combat  
With unyielding gods  
Behind cloggy shrines  
Comes stars afflicted  
By the preening pus  
Of fanatics and sycophants  
Swelling by the second

Leaving livid scars in the wind  
Burying incandescent stars;  
Self-seeking souls in sullen tempers  
Festooned in saviour's robes  
Yielding nothing salutary  
Only ash and hogwash

---

\* Ben Binebai—a Nigerian playwright and scholar.

## Song of innocence

Our memory is reloaded  
With the laughter  
Of moon-lit evenings  
On the lap of granny's endless tales  
Fresh and luscious as dewdrops  
Sleeping with deep green vegetation overnight.

O the cleansing of the beginning  
Granny's shadow lurking behind  
Every step or speech or sentiment  
At the foot of the almond tree  
Flamboyant in its dark green foliage  
In receding evening light.

The steepy mountains  
We climbed every single second  
In the spongy horizon;  
The scary footholds, hanging  
On natural ropes  
Growing wild across trees,  
Like passionate monkeys;  
The dizzy solitude in sundry heights  
Burning with fierce fervour  
Burning out the strain  
Of the daylight sun ...

O shield our noses  
From the dust of the midday horizon  
The natural plots sewn together  
In the impenetrable harmony of mists  
Riding the apocalypse  
With dragon's breath;

Shield us from  
The cat's silent steps  
In the belly of the night  
The robber's cautious shadow  
The point of no return\*

Shield us from  
The psychedelic distractions  
Of whitewashed damsels  
Dazzling like winged beings on high  
The melting pot of the heart  
Planting riots even  
In the blood of the blind.

---

\* The Gold Coast Castle in Ghana, West Africa – a seaside fortress used for slave trade by the British in the 17th century. There is the notorious “Point of no Return” which was the outlet where slaves who were able to withstand the rigidity of their confinement were shipped to intended destinations.



## Dunamis

Now drunk  
On the putrid urine of power  
Their true form takes flight  
Cruises to the naked fore  
Blocks the majestic fall  
Of fecund rain, on human folk.

Like smoke that has swallowed  
The ubiquitous liquor of wind  
Sways this way and that  
They float without meaning in the air;

O none so saintly  
To disband this howling self-system  
Surrender the self-spoiling  
Spoils of almighty dunamis  
For communal indulgence;  
None so saintly  
To shun its stunting seeds  
Shame the general hunger  
Harrying the horizon.

Yet they stand on the podium  
Before the moaning masses  
Their sturdy hopes  
Mowed down by the caterpillar  
Of their rancid wits  
Waving magic wands in the wind  
Those loaded dividends ported  
To the four corners of the earth  
In absolutely abstract terms  
Open only to compromised eyes.

They curse the very thought  
Or divination, or saucy slogan  
Seeking to deprive  
Saints a second season  
With the sacred key of life  
On mountaintops,  
To unlock the stubborn moon.  
Afterall, Oleilei\* remains  
On the beautiful beach.

Nothing shows the moon  
Loathes this weird company  
Laughter lavishly sprouting  
From her genial bosom  
Oblivious or crassly indifferent  
To the restless tongue of fire  
Licking up earth's dire foliage.

---

\* a bird.

## Rhythm of the forsaken

The world is incensed  
When spurious saints snuggle  
Into the moon's bosom  
Drunk on the people's tonic  
Taking a heady leap  
In the village square  
Though like the frog  
However incensed cannot bite.

From the distant cradle  
This world pees  
On love's lofty canvas  
Doves wobble in spunky flight  
Wounded wings hanging  
In dire throats  
Choked by twisted canons  
Of the black power game  
Criss-crossing the clan.

O no pee scents  
On the substrates of the earth—  
Even the salty pee  
Of turbid saints;  
No dark plot passes for  
The queen of the night  
Fondling naked senses.

These saints draw  
Their chiselled swords  
From glittering scabbards  
With plastic caresses  
Smiles without depth, or anchorage  
Floating on the soppy

Belly of the horizon  
Like crude oil on water  
Canceling the sizzle of the sun.

Yet marionettes mount  
The manic moon  
Here and there  
Without a compass  
Without smug blustering godfathers,  
Without a crutch ...

Here and there  
Marionettes mount the moon  
On the staircase of raw guts  
Humming the soulful song  
Of stirring birds  
On the corridors of dawn  
Chirping and chanting salty lines  
In squally storms  
And horrid hurricanes  
In the infinite flight of wings

The pedals of hollow wind  
Surge on the spirit  
Of the forsaken;  
Inner fire burnishes cast-iron wills  
Cascading through rustic groves and squalid seas  
Into canons that nourish mortal blood.

## The death of dark memory

All mortals relish  
The death of dark memory  
Looking for wedges  
To cover leaking canoes  
Stitches to hide hideous nakedness  
In seasons of studs and sighs.

A flourishing memory  
Perfumes the senses  
Eternal songs, they rock  
The inner being  
Climbing the staircase of blood  
To the precincts of the pithy sun  
Alien to craggy bones  
Suffused in intrepid memories.

O sweet strands of memory  
Hosts of radiant angels  
Sow teeming harmonies in the wind  
Alien to discordant dark contours  
The voluptuous clouds  
Sitting on the horizon;

The fourth masquerade  
Must pursue doting fans  
With a glistening cutlass  
In resplendent regalia  
In eye-catching strides.

Sweet strands of memory  
The salty spume of the sea  
Colour of the inimitable carnival  
Winsome melody of the mind  
The senses gallop in their lewd sockets

Like gusty excited horses  
Dispelling the groggy myth  
Of grey hair and wrinkles.

And I remember  
The unassailable lore of the land:  
The fish in bīran's\* company  
Exudes the same buoyant aura

An unflagging star with a stuttering start  
Can seize the season, like Serena slam  
Like a stammering thunderbolt.

---

\* A kind of fish

## Silence is not golden

The choir of silence  
Dampens the fire of the soul  
In the dingy tropics  
Strangulates salubrious laughter  
By the scruff of the neck

Greying hearts need the window  
Of rainbow voices;  
The bleating sheep courts  
Food for the silent.

O though unseen  
Dark dots tan human breath  
Like Hausa kola the teeth;  
Distil the kernel of things  
With clairvoyant words, or  
Leave the horn of the soul  
Groveling in a dungeon  
Exploding at the long last  
With a massive voice  
Like seven cannons in one stride  
Freeing the frozen world.

Besotted souls shout to the sky  
Scavenge for non-existent winds  
In the scattered horizon  
For a free flight to fame;  
Only a moron beats his chest  
In front of genial in-laws—  
Advertising wanton bravado  
To seek their seal.

O sink with a loud voice  
Into the swallowing soil

Like the strident blood  
Of a slit cockerel;  
We tread on gold, without knowing  
Without even a synthetic grin  
Forged in the wind.

Wake those dormant senses  
Into a formidable voice in the wilderness  
Into the ecstasy of triumph  
Sailing swiftly on salted winds  
Tickling splintered memories  
Of dane guns and cutlasses and cudgels.



## Perverts on the prowl

The slur of a stolen mask  
From the forbidden rafters of owu bou\*  
And the fatal strike  
Of infant souls in Potiskum\*  
In the dewdrops of dawn  
Signpost a perverted clan;  
  
O these soulless felons on the prowl  
Even in sacred corners of the world ...

In the profane pilfering  
In the dead of night  
And the wanton massacre  
Of nameless souls  
We weave a mat of bankruptcy  
For our multiple stakes  
As star inhabitants of planet earth

Stripping ourselves naked  
In the market place  
In the broad light of day  
Heaping an abominable  
Dump of shame  
On savvy sires, interminably  
Tied to the womb

For the wounds of despoliation  
Find even the unseen foetus  
Pull the curtain on the lighted road;  
O descant the darts of darkness  
From the conspiracy of masks  
Culpable witnesses to the purloining bond  
Muffled sighs sailing in the wind.

O let the turgid souls  
On the sirened seat  
Who puke where they eat  
Like a primed penis  
Step aside for the suppressed  
Salt of the earth  
Waiting in the winds  
Or be stripped of dire carapaces;  
Garish cascades, visionless oracles  
Carrying a pile of unanswerable queries  
On their vague heads.

How can the sun prosper  
Without uncluttered light  
Radiating her footsteps?

How can the moon  
See through knotty pathways  
In pitch darkness  
Eyes completely closed?

How can we summon the breeze  
For her warm caress,  
Or motherly balm,  
Bruised to the last bone?

---

\* Meeting-place of masquerade groups in the forest

\* In July, 2013, gunmen, suspected to be Boko Haram Islamists, struck in a Government Secondary School in Mamudo, Yobe State, Nigeria, killing several children.

## Give us sanctity

And if we seek to see  
The awesome nakedness  
Of some sulky god  
Gushing tides will swallow  
Already shrinking foreshores  
In one snap of its yawning jaws;

Unseen detonators will  
Grate on the horizon  
Like the mystical massacre  
In a lonely ambush  
Of state security hounds  
Stalking the ombatse \*cult.

Yet in sober truth  
Even the deadliest god  
Is far cleaner in sum  
Than a self-consecrated church—  
Sullen and implacable in spirit  
Slick and regal in flesh  
Crushing the blind folks  
On their mental slate.

O give us sanctity in the wind—  
The first fruit of the godhead  
Not luxuriant signs  
And wondrous derring-do;  
These can be sourced from without  
Even from claws of lions  
Or a vulture's bald head—  
Totems of some cruel god,

When invoked in nakedness  
Cockerel in hand  
In some awning darkness.

---

\* In May 2013, a militia group in Nasarawa State, the Ombatse, allegedly killed several Nigeria Police Officers and operatives of the Directorate of State Security, who were on their way to arrest the leader.

## Gives us life

When men mount  
The dizzy heights  
Of a garlanded throne  
They hobnob with birds and bats  
In the boundless stretches of the horizon  
And fantasize about romance  
In the sappy sun and sister planets

Stumbling into the patriots' petitions  
And the strident clamours  
Down below, in a distant haze.

Give us bakeries, not daily bread;  
This can breed another stretch of inconstancy  
Buttered with a rousing round of rhetoric  
Like Power Holding Company of Nigeria  
So we lean on naked sweat  
Not their flickering senses.

Give us tarred roads  
Like tarmacs at Nnamdi Azikiwe Airport\*  
So we can cruise  
To fecund farms far away  
With brimful energies  
And feisty spirits  
To cut down giant mahoganies;

Not malfunctioning caterpillars  
Showcased on patched paths  
Putrid potholes and puddles  
On which commuters rock azonto\*  
Spawning countless miscarriages.

O give us virgin doves  
To decorate the horizon  
So night can sleep  
With both eyes closed  
In the clasping bosom of life;

Not with nagging mares  
Mutating dreams  
To horrid fantasies  
Not the laughter of fear  
Nor the fear of laughter  
Fouling the obsequious air.

Give us drums and sticks  
White frocks and handkerchieves  
So satiated dancers  
Can evolve into living stars  
So lame spirits can have  
A smooth climb to the moon;

Not dancers without the giddy  
Magic of the waist,  
Floating in the numb air,  
Without soul or bone,  
Like children's animations.

---

\* Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport, Abuja, Nigeria

\* A kind of dance

## The bankrupt mind

These masters of masks  
Pull wild strings  
From those high cliffs  
Twisting mortal paths,  
The canyon of livid mushrooms  
And thorns and cactus  
Yet so close to the skin.

Unhidden, like a sonorous snore  
In darkness, they pay their debts  
In funerary bristles, bungling airs  
Sowing skinny barns  
In far away anthills  
In the minds of mortals  
Squabbling over loading bay  
When all boats are leaking.

And again, in the cloak of night  
In measured feline steps  
They offer a sullen bowl  
Of blood and beasts to their gods,  
Like a feast of ants on sugar  
The sweetness enters their heads.

They paddle robbers and murderers  
Free of charge  
To their victims' sanctuaries  
To profane pearly peace.

O a funeral is never distant  
Wherever the scene, the loss of breath;  
A funeral is never a jubilee  
Though animated with cascading fanfare—  
Wherever the scene, the sullenness of shadows

The soberness of another lost battle.

The bankrupt mind  
Is like a drunken eye—  
Sees seven in giddy delirium  
Beyond flesh or form or film;  
The slapped eye sees stars  
Dancing in the morbid air,  
Incandescent, with multiple sparks  
Flummoxing sight, sap, and snares  
Building dykes and drainages  
In the turning space  
On the brink of intractable flames  
Until the saviour's second coming.

This is the steely trap  
Saints must jump over  
Or abandon the call  
Dismembered in their native communes  
Scattered in lost tracks  
Like a lunatic vending nothing valuable.



## The delta of yore

When memory takes you  
On a cinematographic voyage  
Through dew-draped forests of yore  
Phosphorescent bubbles  
Walk gaily through your blood  
Teasing the tearful eye—  
Harbinger of celestial things.

Animated squirrels on the crest  
Of virgin palm trees  
Pecking at their luscious red fruits;  
Euphonious songs of the canary  
Tickling the humid horizon  
In the unfurling sun;  
Antelopes in squelching strides  
Ravishing flourishing green fields ...

Now the air is taut  
Like a steel antelope trap  
Ready to snap ...

And we take strange steps  
Deeper and deeper into the woods  
Or some irredeemable trenches  
In combat with seven dreaded spirits  
Intangible, knotting the gurgling blood  
Ruling foul forests of the clan.

The gods have stricken us  
With a bizarre ailment:  
Immutable bondsmen  
To insensate strangers  
On oily seats, who perforate  
Even the raw breath

Mortals take for naught.

These strangers,  
Not in an aboriginal sense,  
Pedantic strangers to lofty seats  
Without tools, without  
Dulcet propositions,  
Masters of musty gestures  
Now treated as wistful patriots  
Carriers of the white light,

Strip us of divine glow  
Strip us of luscious laughter  
Echoing in the vast greenery  
Hanging in far away hills.

O let the edenic memory  
Of the Delta of yore  
Speed our steps over  
These fixed crosses  
These slippery paths of stone—  
Stunning incendiary felons  
To the bone.

O let us see  
Their frantic fangs  
Drop with red-hot speed;  
Let the mischievous wind blow  
So we see the anus  
Of the secret laughters  
Of priests and barons and cultists and politicians  
Spawning mournful moments as milestones.

## The new stars

We can hear the chants of victory  
Echoing in the distant hills  
Blazing banners heralding the arrival  
Of that gawky godfather  
His stomach sputtering sticky grime  
His weighty winds rustling  
Through the torrid horizon.

We can see the wings clearly now  
Visible even from the lowest valley  
Fanning the unfailing cycle  
Of miscarriages and stillbirths  
In concert with grisly gods  
Gnarling the grim air  
Discolouring the rainbow long ripe  
In the belly of the sky  
Bungling new routes to the waterfront

Where magic hawks perforate  
The prurient pouch of memory  
Their secret steps shame the cat's  
Their ferocious pounce shames the leopard's  
Bulldozing through sacred barricades  
With hot, hot claws

Plundering the public flesh  
With flaming gusto  
Hoisting the skeleton on a flagpole  
For the universal eye, frightened  
To a dead corner, like an escaping rat.

But we reap heaving harvests  
In the middle of a maelstrom  
Silently striving triumphant

Even in the midst of barren fields;  
Diamonds hide in fleshy depths  
Tugging at the substrates of human guts  
To reap their stupendous bounties.

Swollen shoulders scratch the surface  
Of the wind, rattled by its hollowness;  
Shrinking guts in moments of crisis  
Gather nothing, rattled  
By nightmares and tumbling dreams.

## The road to fate

Carrion-crows in ritual dance  
Around the oozing carcass  
Signing mournful signatures in the wind  
Remind man of his fatal limits.

The road to the market  
Buzzes with people  
Higgling and haggling over  
Moods and merchandise  
Promising, like a budding rainbow.

The road to the cemetery  
Wears a sullen sackcloth;  
The eerie stillness of the air  
The morbid shriek of owls and bats  
The disconsolate tears on the tomb  
Spell man's ultimate sanctuary.

O no garland on this road  
Banishes the hazy chill  
Hanging in the horizon;  
The soulful sound of siren  
Carnivals floating in the air  
For seven long days  
Closing roads, streets and cities  
Only hoist the hole in the heart  
Print the wounded blood in the air,

How can pageantry or glee  
Heal the gash  
Even apothecaries exacerbate?  
No quantity of water can quench  
The roaring flames of Jesse-Ogube\*  
Swelling by the second with flowing fuel.

A clown departs the stage  
Through a bizarre back door  
Hiding dates of burial;  
The blast of multiple cannons  
Heralds the passing of capons  
Shaking the entire universe  
To her roots, in the precincts  
Of a withering moon—  
The victim of this wormy curse  
Eating up the sap of the earth  
Bit by bit, into a tombstone ...  
Out of breath  
The pursuing fourth masquerade  
Remembers the prize of penitence  
But already, the human race  
Has sunk irretrievably  
Into the bland confines  
Of mass discoloration.

---

\* A community in Delta State, Nigeria.

## On human relations, dreams & the gods

Do not prostrate before the moon  
Or present oblation to the clouds  
To paste your dreams  
On the purlieus of the sky;

There is no solitary passage  
To the ornaments of the world.

The fanfare of the fourth masquerade  
Swells with fans straining  
And gasping for breath  
On the long expanse  
Of the town square

Swallowing all mortal inhibitions  
Or boundaries of blood  
With no side acquiescing  
Without a show of stamina;  
An evenly tempered relationship  
Is the centre of the world.

Who says the solitude of self-seekers  
Who revel in cowing comrades  
Pushing kinsmen to obscure corners  
Like a drenched hen,  
After the season of harvest  
After the awesome mask  
No longer adorns the face  
Is no cause to caress the crowd  
In the fullness of floods  
In the fullness of festivals  
In the fullness of offices?

The mistakes of blood  
And the heart  
Blindfold susceptible human folk  
Down the abyss; without  
Milestones or monuments  
Without footprints or signposts.

Yet some expired maestros regale us  
With craggy phallus and orifices  
Long lost their friction, in high life  
Mating wild clouds on the sky  
Begetting weird offspring  
Timeless scar of mauled moments,  
Like a leopard's hapless victim.

O sainthood and sacrifice serve as dew  
To human dreams and fancies  
Yielding clear vibes and visions  
Leading to prized diadems  
Birdsongs seizing the horizon  
In climes standing on two legs.



## Dark stars

We must count the stars  
On five leprous fingertips  
We must count these stars  
On scattered teeth  
Of shrivelled corn cobs.

We must count the stars  
Which bring down multiple mists  
Upon the clan at the break of day  
When nests open their dew-draped doors  
To the world in throaty songs

Celestial beings with broken wings  
Cannot carry pregnant messages  
Through the open skies  
To retrieve lost moments  
Of the earth;

The legendary cheetah  
Without those elastic legs  
Cannot be a speedster;

A broken burglary proof  
Loses the shielding power  
Of a brooding hen  
Over her tender offspring,

Like tongues of fire  
In harmattan shrubs  
Drive away wild beings  
In the dead of night.

Patriotism parades a perfumed name  
Like Givenchy, not the leprous air  
In climes under the tropical skies;

O do not think  
Only maestros washed with herbs  
Or washed by ubiquitous mermaids  
See beyond the moment's dimness.

Come let us toast  
To whitewashed patriots of our day  
Who beat hefty chests  
Before disillusioned in-laws  
To remove specks in their eyes  
Long grown symptomatic mucor

Only to falter in every step  
Ringing a dumb bell  
At the very moment of reckoning.

Unrepentant, like the python  
In unimpeachable grip of its prey  
These patriots have drained all eggs  
Across the dumb clan  
Even before the break of day  
Scattering empty shells in the horizon.

## The wide road

They give you the watchword  
Of the secret road to Jerusalem:

*Patronize whitewashed covens  
Or remain low in the spirit.  
Our meetings spew raucous songs  
And long fraternal doxologies  
Offering the wise ones of the altar  
Perfumed paths to the peak.*

No argument thrives here  
All *dɔbale*\* to the high command  
In the mould of Fela's zombie  
And clowns get magisterial crowns  
And the holy strike of thunder  
Prolongs the people's pains  
In the terrestrial world.

Here I ring the bell of bards  
Who see through the sparkling garments  
And tawdry smiles of musketeers;  
You do not bury a dog  
To consummate a clean plot;  
You do not shed intimate blood  
To potentiate a pure spirit—

A crass cannibal cannot be a godhead.

No wonder  
Whoever courts the mystery of Egbesu\*  
Must present a white petition—  
The white cloth has no hand  
In the massacre of blood brothers

Not even a distant mortal  
Not at crossroads with the light  
Or out to mortify the white race—  
A white heart needn't fear  
The mystery of the white cloth.

So the white symbol  
All over the universe  
Dreads oil, stands above  
The cabalistic crowd  
Roving in volcanic summits  
Above blood-sucking sophists  
Who pull down the inveterate earth  
On whitewashed altars.

---

\* Yoruba word for bow; genuflect; prostrate.

\* Ijaw god of war.

## A loud homily

A contrite thief treads softly  
Even with a masked visage;  
For pilfering adventurers  
On some garlanded throne  
Contrition floats on the mind  
Like a long dead log.

For pilfering adventurers  
On some garlanded throne  
Contrition is a lifeless word  
Consigned to lexicons long forgotten,  
Or offering quiet service  
To loud sanctimonious hymns  
On some insignificant altar.

O the blind does not miss  
The covert covenants  
Of the salt of mankind  
Who openly spit  
On the narrow way;

The blind does not miss  
The blistered spores of the soul  
Scattered on endless meadows  
Even the upturned honour  
In high quarters  
Shining on the earth  
Through acquiescent interspaces  
Like sunlight, when the day  
Stands on its head.

The blind does not miss  
The throbbing tapestry  
Of pliant pilgrims

Floating faiths  
Creepy hosannas  
Surface grimaces

Imprecise moorings  
On the ever-swelling river of want  
Watching a rightful glory  
Abscond in the crashing waves  
Of the vast, vast sea  
The fruitless tip-toeing  
To reach fleshy racks  
Planting wormy pains  
In the substrates of the heart  
The pile of unanswered prayers  
The mangled mountains  
Encircling God's shapely image ...

And who says  
It is of consequence  
How we clamber  
To the summit of the earth?

O carry the soul along  
In loud self-umbrage—  
The living insignia of breath  
After the carapace  
Is returned to dust  
Imprinted on the pages  
Of man's terrestrial sojourn  
In naked light, or in some  
Secret corner of the globe.

Remember, long guns  
And detonators and pranks  
Have one morbid target:

*To kill the soul  
In uncluttered morning dew  
When the forests wake  
From yesternight's slumber  
In creamy green suits.*

## The patriot's compass

The true tickle is in the heart  
Where the moon finds a field  
To stretch its steady luminescence  
Beyond the limits  
Of an unyielding night.

The true tickle in the heart  
Sprouts from the mellow  
Orifices of memory  
In the staircase it unfurls  
For kindred spirits to consummate  
The crowns of their hearts

And the elements come together  
Gregarious in their green creed  
Etched on the lap  
of a flowing stream

Not minding the spoils of office  
And their wondrous estates  
Beclouding insufferable remembrance  
Of yesteryears of wet garri  
And groundnuts or palm kernel  
Bursting forth from barren bones  
And burnt out blood.

O how we tread softly  
On this vast globe  
On the fearful prospect  
Of drowning naked  
With six-inch blocks  
Tied to the waist  
Wobbling with stuck breath  
In deep deep waters



Without even an imaginary straw  
For the crisis-laden soul  
To clutch at.

Vultures cross the mental horizon  
Flapping wet wings, in ominous knowledge  
Of the password to hell;  
And swallows and eagles,  
Not to be outdone,  
Fly around the mind  
Shrieking in pregnant relish  
Like a kingdom's elated spokesman  
Announcing a long-delayed coronation.

So the shadow which domiciled  
In the forlorn horizon for ages  
Scours the soul for swallows and eagles  
Disappears in the awesome canvas  
Of the rainbow in the near distance.

## Rising above the tide

The mistake in destiny's map  
Carries certified tramps in frenetic tides  
Toward a crown of needles  
And a teeming conundrum

Toward a mass of green vegetation  
Transmuted into a brown cellar  
O man's tremulous moods!  
It is not for nothing, comrades  
Dolphins sleep with one eye open  
The crocodile is blind to colour.

Like the Iguana, they do not have ears  
For wild gossips or moans or murmurs  
Nor for the haunting tremors of wetlands  
Nor for the teasing taunts of true stars  
Nor for the alternative toasts of sages  
Who dive far into the deep  
For pearls tucked away  
In the bosom of inveterate mermaids.

O how their ears angle  
For pandering fables  
From the mouths of benighted fans  
Painting tingling pictures on their mind  
Like the early garden of Eden  
Like the manatee which tickles  
Its hapless preys to death.

O let the wide world  
Go for a cleansing  
Of the innermost strands of the soul  
At the sacred waterfront  
So the queen of the night

Can send her sensuous perfume  
To all corners of the earth  
Heaving with too much selves  
Nude and sleep-walking  
In the dark, for too long.

This earth needs sunlight  
In her innermost chambers—  
The heart, together  
With elemental prayers  
To rise above the tide  
That is neck deep  
Evolve a new foliage  
In the steaming horizon  
Over the remaining seasons.

Not soulful isolation  
Masquerading as contentment—  
The goat that avoids yam  
Has a broken set of teeth;

Not souls strained in the blood  
In fresh morning dew  
Parading as the chosen ones—  
A frightful apocalypse  
In garments of promise.

## These yawning omissions

These yawning omissions  
Under the tropical skies  
Perforating the loft canvas  
Of our own creeds;

The detached plugging of holes  
Pretentious baring of hearts  
On the podium of public glare  
Parodying Hannah's sobbing beauty.

Let this cross pass over:  
The silent shadows of scavengers  
On the walls of a flummoxed fate  
Riding on ghostly dreams;

The entrails of insidious godfathers  
Veiled in scented habiliments  
Forgetting the tide of today  
Is far too strong  
For their frail bones  
Far too fast  
For their frail brains ...

This brood of fugitive hawks  
Bereft of benign blood  
Strike a double leap in the wind  
A double boon in the tide  
Aided by mystics and masters and mermaids;

Seeds of sunlight  
Do not grow  
On cloud-caked hearts  
Forests inhabited  
By diabolical tropical gods.

O the cringing nerves of aborigines  
Paddling across seven seas, hiding  
A million sharks, sweating  
In the moon making their day  
For blood calls to blood  
In the deafening strike of thunder.

Who on earth can comb  
The roving substrates of a storm  
Impregnable, scattering all across its way?  
Who on earth can boast anchorage  
For a depraved soul and his sword  
Smothering even the altar  
Of the most high?

Who on earth can clip the wings  
Of the corpulent crow and carrion  
Having wilfully seized the wind?

How can the bard lament  
The bars of a rosy race  
Sinking into smudged depths  
Beyond the punting pole  
When the world  
Surges gingerly forward?

## The kingdom of self-seekers

No one stumbles on  
Deadly spirits in feisty glee  
In the bowels of Ndoro Bou\*  
In the unfathomable depths of the night  
And scurries away  
Without a scar.

The music of mystic birds  
Play in guttural cadences  
In the background  
Flapping shadowy wings  
In the horizon ...

Sometimes, whatever befalls us  
As mortals, comes from the self  
Even the strike of the fourth masquerade;  
Disillusioned initiates, rueing their fate,  
Rake up dry bones of memory

Scattered across several seasons  
Splintered time-bombs planted in the psyche  
Exploding at the height of consciousness;  
Smashing the unborn mortal  
On long uterine walls, in anguish,  
Without as much as a swan song.

The harmony of satiated souls  
Sparks in the strides of time  
The salt of stillness  
Agrees not with hot-headed broods

Drowns the senses in flight  
Beyond inward winds  
Resplendent in sight

Rotten in the innermost sites.

O see the wanton cracks  
In the kingdom of self-seekers—  
Covert, inconstant, in form and frame,  
Which accepts no kola nut  
For a truce; no palm wine  
For violent surges on the sea

The passing wind hollering  
Her hollow brims  
Extending long green fields  
Lying fallow without end  
Or falling for coy scabs  
On the naked beachsand  
In the scorching heat  
From the punctual oven  
Up on the sky.

---

\* The forest of Ndoro, Bayelsa State, Nigeria, is reputed to have spell-binding mystical powers.

## On the media, intellectuals, and marabouts

The media and intellectuals too  
Are no longer subtle accomplices;  
They now carry acidic arsenal  
Across open spaces  
To the doorstep of partisan foes,  
  
Sprawling like roaring waters  
In the deep spummy sea  
Or an overarching army  
Encamped at the city gate  
Ever ready to pounce—  
So resplendent in a dismal way.

The new patriots pad their path  
In their breasts, together  
With throbbing marabouts;  
O these ghoulish marabouts  
Quartered in secret hovels  
With occultic hair  
And white-chalk-circled eyes  
Cover background interspaces  
And exposing pores—

More ubiquitous  
Than the wind's breath ...

And the shallow songs of heathens  
Swallow the soulful choir of the cherub  
On whose canvas sparks heavenly memories  
Their long throats wet the ground  
So crowns fit the head of clowns;  
The clan, distraught, lives through the loss  
Dawns come and go  
Without the warm touch of light.



No one tries the patience of Odele\*  
For too long, like those wanton lads  
At boarding school, tying  
A friend's fleshy thing and scrotum  
During siesta on a double-bunk bed  
With a long rope, drawn and released  
At the other end, in turn  
Softly remembering the conundrum  
Of squirrels caught with  
Wire traps and palm fruits.

No mask made by man  
Hides the twisted contours of a face  
In broad daylight, for too long;  
Not even consummate crooks  
Who bamboozle blood brothers  
Or provide ready tinder  
To true comradeship  
Exploding in hearty flames.

This lair of bearded prophets  
Inconstant in colour, like the chameleon  
Ever warm, like a doting cat;

This macabre melody  
Primed by the pen people  
Pulling the wide world along  
One smoldering bout of itchy fever.

---

\* A god in Ayakoromo town, Delta State, Nigeria.

## Plugging the holes

They always hold meetings  
In the smug blackness of night  
To tackle matters of state  
As it were, plug the leaking sides  
Of the proverbial ship.

How we give hot flesh  
To the ancient myth  
Of emptying one's fortune  
When one sweeps out dirt  
From the confines  
Of a homely compound  
After hens have come to roost—  
The head a awry shadow.

O wedge the leaking sides  
Of the heart's canoe  
Fast sinking in the overcast skies  
And howling waves and tides;  
Who can mend the mangled moon  
Far up the sockets of the sky  
With haunting earthy voices  
And covert steps of night men?

Who can pluck laughter  
From a dumb giant  
Gasping for breath  
In a python's elastic mouth?  
Potholes still everything  
(Not only vehicular traffic)  
On the sterile fields of men's heart  
Despoiled from the garden of Eden  
With multiple signatures against the spirit.

Let it be ingrained in the blood  
Those who struggle to save their heads  
Perish in their weak dream  
Descanted even before cockcrow;  
The woes of the weak  
Enchant the unrepentant despot  
Devoid of soul-searching song,

Like a dyed-in-the-wool lieutenant  
Mining into brutish reservoirs  
To daze a lily-chested acolyte  
Whose fleeing boss fails to settle  
A long overdue debt.

O these stilling potholes  
The horrid handiwork  
Of pathfinders with no soul;  
Give a walking stick to a cripple  
He lashes at you right away

Smothered by the strident colours  
On your flag, hoisted  
On far too high hills;  
Smothered by your overbearing pastimes  
The unbearable puff of your breath  
Scattered on common souls  
Without the echo of being  
Eternal self-slaves; ensnared by hollow winds.

## The laughter of light

The laughter of light is infinite  
Swift in function  
Like a hunter's hound  
On the trail of fleeing antelopes  
Or a coy cat catching a wakeful rat  
Or a wall-gecko attacking  
Some meddlesome insect.

No wonder brothers close their fields  
Placing intruding light on permanent exile  
At once a crown of the proverbial fleece  
Turns stool-cloth, hosting  
Some nebulous arses;

O the wizard of Amatebe\*  
The centre of his head  
Laden with the lore of the land  
Prowls stealthily with stunting powers  
Locks away pens of sweating saplings  
In a place beyond science or naked eyes.

And how they languish  
In the heat waves of fruitless toil  
Lashing at their souls  
Hatchet men of night lords  
Pelt their sleep and steps  
With countless arcane arrows  
Yanking open living graves.

A crowd of musketeers  
Menacing in their bogus masks  
Sullen in their nakedness  
Walk the streets in sultry daylight  
Blending with the light

Without seam or sweat-bath.

Nothing is utterly strange  
Under the tropical sun  
Debonairs in the day  
Turn commanders at night.

Yet the bard's heart boils  
Only school boys  
Or kindergarten initiates  
Sever infernal links  
To open up  
The Glory of all Lands ...

What happens to the fuming sires  
In some nightly congregation  
Or in dumb obeisance  
To some dusky god  
Mumbling some darksome thoughts  
In the earlobes of some totem

Tucked well well away  
In some nebulous corner  
Covering quite some acres  
And the shadow hanging in the horizon  
Waxing stronger and stronger?

---

\* A quarter in Bomadi, a riverine community in Delta State.

## The dilemma of the passover train

Silent boos and jeers  
Swamp the moralist on mere lips  
Craving a smooth passage  
To the ultimate light  
Back-slapping soul mates  
On buttered balconies;

And churlish charlatans  
Wearing white smocks  
Litter the terrace, harried  
By their own hangovers.

Mired in the way of the age  
They fill all interspaces—  
A staircase to marble mountains  
Where, like the crab, they pick  
Their hearts' pearls with two hands.

It may linger a while  
The captivity of white souls  
Will linger a while ...

And their sanctified voices  
Drowned in depths beyond  
Ethereal divers of pearl;

And vendors of blood-sucking gods  
Taunt the universe  
With cloudy snapshots of the rainbow  
Inscribed in the blood of martyrs  
Yawning in their bums  
Beyond the surface buntings  
The painted revelry  
The marble celebrations.

O this bard  
Is in delirious anguish  
Over the dilemma of the train:

Who do we pass over  
With all souls lost to lust;  
Even the finest fisher of men  
Bathed a million times  
In the baptism of the spirit  
Oozes like rotten atabala\* head

Or a fart saved for seven days  
In a rumbling stomach?

---

\* Tilapia fish

## A hollow claim

A sanctuary in a public square  
Breeds squalid sires  
Empty of the tiniest  
Of the mind's ornaments

In secret scoffing laughter  
At the propitious dream of the soul  
Descending to the bowels of the earth.

Grandma says what is public  
Is no longer a moral closet  
Pulling together all kinds of pilgrims  
Across the wide expanse of breath  
A lot fanning the flesh—  
The nebulous notion paradise ends  
In pants, or in petals of purses;  
Just a few the incandescent soul.

Take a stride of faith  
Towards the fortress of the wise  
Make oblation; seal a glowing fate  
Just a step remains  
And a fall on the stony path—  
And the silence is eternal.

O what is sharpened in the spirit  
Is set for war in the flesh  
Not the hollow claims  
Of brothers of the cross;

Without proper immersion in Pentecost  
Clergymen ogle ravenously  
At sumptuous handmaidens of the Lord  
Setting the haunches even



Of a wrinkled old man on fire  
Spreading like cancer  
In the congregation—  
To catch a manatee  
Spread a big-eyed net  
Across a shrub of elephant grass  
On the seashore.

Remove the carapace of sanctimony  
Swamping the altar  
See hot beads of mating sweat  
On the wrong mattress  
In the cell along the passageway  
To the inviolate sanctorium;

O remove the carapace of sanctimony  
Swamping the altar  
See globules of larceny  
On disparate properties and purses.

## The rats of McIver Waterside\*

When the bait  
Of a pugnacious patriot  
Catches a big fish  
His jaw bones drop  
In disparate dumb gestures  
In unorthodox paranoia  
The eyes no longer see  
Corpulent felons, ears deaf  
To tales of fumbling fortresses  
  
Pandering to shadowy controls  
On the strings of the purse  
And some poisoned bowls of honey—  
A grumpy guillotine  
Operated by some silent voices  
In the sultry background  
Bungling the pubescent rainbow  
On the distant sky.

O no rat overfed  
At McIver Waterside  
Can jump over a barricade  
Of seamless barbed wire  
Even of the smallest height—  
Meat for the roving cat;  
  
No one faces a flare with fanfare  
How can one quench Jesse fire  
With mere spittle?  
Even a phantom fan  
Swells the flames, multiplying  
The howling smoke in the horizon

Distil the protective mask  
Over pongy winds  
To sail to the pearls of the heart  
Heightening the salty swing.

The stranger sinks in the waves  
Oblivious of the gathering blood  
In seascape memories  
Oblivious of that impregnable Bomadi\* myth  
Of aborigines in a passover covenant  
With the god of the beach.

This god, dripping with alien blood  
Blind to the inviolate knot  
Tying the brotherhood of man  
Is in one long accord  
With some occultic tree  
In some aboriginal home  
Along the creeks, stunted  
Though untouched by man or storm

Offering ancestral cover  
To assorted crooks  
Who come from the clan  
Through paternal or maternal routes  
Who come in the cover of night  
In secret supplication ...

The sore truth is  
When the season  
Fades into a graveyard  
Night men enjoy a plumed passage  
To the broad way, like  
Those Abuja standard bearers  
Saying a loud Aye to life pension  
For bulging-stomached patriots  
Who swallowed the rainbow in service

Preparing under-aged brides  
To massage failing haunches at old age  
Forgetting a sickle is not for  
An unripe palm fruit  
Forgetting the old man's farm diminishes.

And the tremors of the earth  
Multiply, unending  
Like cooking manatee meat  
Leaving the last tongue of dissent  
Floating in the hot afternoon wind  
Of a yellow voyage into oblivion.

---

\* In Warri, Delta State, Nigeria.

\* A riverine community in Delta State, Nigeria.

## Dreams

Ensconced in the yawning hole  
Of a layabout's head  
Are imperial strides  
On the balcony of princes.

Hollow crevices  
Are the mind's handmaiden  
Coming from the unfathomable  
Depths of the coast  
Intangible yet concrete  
Infinitesimal yet immense  
Filling boundless voids  
In their fleshy abstraction.

In the vast clearing  
Of the mind  
Lost stars find a way  
To the main course  
In dampening tunnels and turmoil;  
Tendrils sprout beyond  
Love's fertile furnace  
Beyond Onobrakpeya's\* animated colours  
That beget swelling seasons  
Stepping on star-lit staircases  
To the howling wonders on mountaintops  
In the ceaseless laughter of loins.

---

\* Bruce Onobrakpeya– Nigerian printmaker, painter and sculptor.

## Mystery

*(for my mother's people)*

I remember the forlorn footpath  
To Kpakiamas\* market  
Through the chilly  
Precincts of Asiyabou\*  
Exuding deep green vegetation  
Unaxed and uncutlashed  
From the beginning of things  
Where birds sang enchanting tunes  
In long deafening unison;  
Here the ground was littered  
With lush and lickable fruits  
One couldn't pick, for fear  
Of the god's wrath  
Hanging on a still gust  
Of wind, in the eerie horizon;  
Was it not a strident taboo  
To look left, where  
The shrine was stationed,  
So mortals did not  
Behold a god's face?  
O one thought  
Man and god needed to tango  
In one eternal clasp  
Like mortar and pestle  
To fashion a decent voyage  
Against the roaring tide.

---

\* Poet's maternal community in Delta State, Nigeria.

\* A forest dedicated to a god.

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*The Fourth Masquerade* consolidates Ebi Yeibo's poetic maturity with clear, insistent, anxious tone; pruned, startling, gripping images; and a sweeping thematic range that begins from the Niger Delta and reaches the breadth and depth of the Nigerian society. Each poem here is a moving, lyrical testament from a poetic mind that has an abiding faith in life and survival. At once communal, nationalistic and deeply humanistic, Yeibo's voice has, through five engaging collections, established itself as one of the most sustained and coherent authorities of the (eco-)poetry emerging from the Niger Delta.

—**E.E. Sule, PhD**

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Lapai, Niger State, Nigeria.*

Beyond the seemingly workaday appeal of its diary-like rhythm and scope, Ebi Yeibo's lines in *The Fourth Masquerade* are inviting for the sheer bravado of naming wrongs the way masquerades do in Nigeria. This visage is blended with the forcefulness of the tribunes of old and is evocative of the courage and brilliance of a Mahmoud Darwish and a Niyi Osundare. There is a measure of excitement discernible from the freshness of the metaphors and remarkable collocations with which the poet hymns the dirge appropriate to the cancerous linings of a polity that works towards its own destruction.

—**Austine Amanze Akpuda, PhD**

*Abia State University, Uturu, Nigeria.*

*The Fourth Masquerade* will always remain remarkable in the corpus of Yeibo's imaginative composition for two important reasons. First, it does not merely comment on or versify social events of everyday life in Nigeria; the poems also make social, political and historical analysis of these events and by extension foreground the urgency of a second independence, negotiable through a synergy between the gods, ancestors and humanity. Secondly, one easily notices the wide range and constancy of Yeibo's vision in this collection in the way he epigrammatically captures human flaws through his penetrating power of thought, the artful deployment of metaphors and the use of folk tradition in order to defend exalted human values. But more importantly, most of the poems signal the answers to the eternal questions confronting humanity.

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**kraftgriots**